

Written Testimony of
Ambassador Roger F. Noriega
Visiting Fellow, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research
Before a Hearing of the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence
Committee on Homeland Security
U.S. House of Representatives
Thursday, July 7, 2011

“Hezbollah in Latin America: Implications for U.S. Homeland Security”

Mr. Chairman, members of the subcommittee, I very much appreciate this opportunity to testify before you today. I would also like to thank you and the Committee for your leadership on this very important issue that, quite frankly, does not get the attention it deserves among the many competing foreign threats and policy priorities.

It is well known that Hezbollah acts as a proxy for Iran — specifically, of the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. These determined and deadly enemies of the United States have made substantial progress in the last six years to expand their influence and operations in Latin America. Their expanding activities are the result of a conscious, offensive strategy to carry their fight to our doorstep, which receives indispensable support from the regime of Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez.

Our research — from open sources, subject-matter experts, and sensitive sources within various governments — has identified at least two parallel terrorist networks growing at an alarming rate in Latin America. One is operated by Hezbollah, aided by its collaborators, and another is managed by a cadre of notorious Qods operatives. These networks cooperate to carry out fundraising, money-laundering schemes, narcotics smuggling, proselytization, recruitment, and training. We can identify more than 80 operatives in at least 12 countries throughout the region (with the greatest areas of concern being Brazil, Venezuela, and the Southern Cone).

Of particular interest to this Subcommittee, no doubt, are the several published reports, citing U.S. law enforcement and intelligence sources, that Hezbollah operatives have provided weapons and explosives training to drug trafficking organizations that operate along the U.S. border with Mexico and have sought to radicalize Muslim populations in several Mexican cities. The U.S. and Mexican governments have declined to share information publicly on these cases. (Our inquiries to at least one Mexican official about a specific arrest of a suspected Hezbollah operative in Mexico in June 2010 were met with the response, “Don’t ask about that.”) It is clear that this is a potential threat that has captured the attention of authorities on both sides of the border. This Congress and the American people have the right to know how our government is working with Mexico to meet this challenge to our common security.

Hezbollah has a very clear *modus operandi* that it is applying in the Americas. By infiltrating or establishing mosques or “Islamic centers” throughout the region, Hezbollah is spreading its influence, legitimizing its cause, and advancing its violent *jihad* on our doorstep. It also is raising funds through various criminal and commercial operations, recruiting converts from among disaffected youth and others, and developing its operational capabilities in our own Hemisphere.

Unfortunately, the Hezbollah threat in the Americas is not new: it is implicated in the deadly terrorist bombings in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1992 (of the Israeli Embassy) and 1994 (of a Jewish Community Center). However, today, Hezbollah's presence in Latin America is growing significantly with the support of the Chávez regime in Venezuela. Chávez, who has a track record of supporting Colombian narcoterrorists, has cooperated with Iran to provide political support, financing, or arms to Hezbollah, Hamas, or Palestinian Islamic Jihad in this Hemisphere and elsewhere. For example, Venezuela's Margarita Island has eclipsed the infamous "Tri-Border Area" – the region where Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay come together in South America – as a principal safe haven and center of Hezbollah operations in the Americas.

A key operative in the Hezbollah network in Latin America is Ghazi Atef Salameh Nassereddine Abu Ali, a man who was born in Lebanon, became a Venezuelan citizen about 10 years ago, and now is Venezuela's No. 2 diplomat in Syria. Along with at least two of his brothers, he manages a network that raises and launders money and recruits and trains operatives to expand Hezbollah's influence in Venezuela and throughout Latin America. Nassereddine was black-listed by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in June 2008 for his fundraising and logistical support on behalf of Hezbollah. However, testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs last month by State Department officials suggests that they are unaware of the very important role he now is playing to expand that terrorist group's reach beyond Venezuela.

Using his diplomatic status, Nassereddine has built and consolidated relationships with Hezbollah officials in the Middle East, first in Lebanon and now in Syria. Meanwhile, his brother Abdallah Nassereddine, maintains relationships in the broader Islamic community via a multi-national organization known as the Federation of Arab and American Associations. (FEARAB has affiliates throughout South America and the Caribbean with most regional meetings held in Sao Paulo or Buenos Aires.) All the while, their younger brother, Oday Nassereddine, has established a powerbase in Venezuela by setting up training operations on Margarita Island, and is now recruiting adherents via the *Circulos Bolivarianos* in Barquisimeto, 170 miles southwest of Caracas. (The *Circulos Bolivarianos* are ubiquitous neighborhood monitoring committees made up of the most radical followers of Hugo Chávez.)

The individual who oversees the parallel Hezbollah network on behalf of the Qods Force is Mohsen Rabbani, a high-ranking Iranian wanted by prosecutors in Argentina for his role in the 1992 and 1994 Buenos Aires attacks. At that time, Rabbani was credentialed as a cultural attaché at the Iranian embassy in the Argentine capital. Today, he relies on a network of Argentine converts that he cultivated during that period to recruit operatives throughout the region who are selected for radicalization and terrorist training in Venezuela and in Iran (specifically, Qom).

Although Rabbani is wanted by Argentina and is the object of an Interpol "red notice," he travels periodically to the region. For example, Rabbani was in Venezuela in March 2011, and in Brazil last September, where he and his brother (who lives in Brazil) have recruited dozens of followers to their radical cause. According to sources in Brazilian intelligence, who were cited by an investigative article in the important Brazilian magazine *VEJA*, at least 20 operatives from Hezbollah, Al Qaeda, and the Islamic Jihad are using Brazil as a hub for terrorist activity.

Two of Rabbani's favored Argentinean disciples are now operating in Chile. Sheik Karim Abdul Paz, who studied under Rabbani in Qom, is the Imam of a cultural center in Santiago, and Sheik Suhail Assad is a Professor at the University of Santiago. Both have publicly stated that they are sympathetic to Hezbollah. Suhail travels frequently throughout Central and South America, meeting with local Muslim communities.

As recently as two weeks ago, a U.S. State Department official told this Congress that Hezbollah activity in the Western Hemisphere was confined to "fundraising" – as if that were comforting. The fact is, that assertion grossly understates the growing Hezbollah threat in our Hemisphere, as my foregoing testimony indicates.

Please allow me to provide some additional anecdotes to illustrate my contention that Hezbollah is on the move in the Americas, and its activities represent a grave and growing threat to the U.S. homeland:

- At least one member of the terrorist network plotting to detonate fuel tanks and pipelines at New York's JFK International Airport met with Mohsen Rabbani in Iran; he was subsequently arrested en route to Venezuela where he planned to board a flight to Teheran.
- One of Rabbani's principal collaborators in the Americas is the Sheik Khaled Razek Tak el-Din, a Sunni radical from the Sao Paulo Guarulhos mosque, which is linked to members of the Treasury Department-designated Tri-Border network that provides significant financial and logistical support to Hezbollah in Lebanon. As far back as 1995, Tak el-Din hosted Al Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed.
- Last spring, two Iranian Hezbollah operatives were conducting terror training on Venezuela's Margarita Island for persons brought there from other countries in the region. Colombian authorities have reported to me that Hezbollah operates in areas of their country where the narcoterrorist group FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) has a presence.
- The cocaine kingpin Walid Makled, several of whose companies did business with the Hezbollah operative and Venezuelan diplomat Ghazi Nassereddine, confirmed in a televised interview on April 3 that Hezbollah conducts fundraising and operates cocaine labs in Venezuela with the protection of that government.
- On November 4, 2009, Israeli commandos intercepted a shipment of grenades, Katyusha rockets, 500,000 rounds of ammunition, and other Russian and Iranian arms aboard the cargo vessel, *Francop*, which was carrying these weapons from the Venezuelan port of Guanta to Syria, where the intended recipient was Hezbollah.
- Hugo Chávez hosted a terror summit of senior leaders of Hamas ("supreme leader" Khaled Meshal), Hezbollah (unnamed "chief of operations"), and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Secretary General Ramadan Abdullah Mohammad Shallah) in Caracas on August 22, 2010. That extraordinary meeting was organized at the suggestion of Iran, and the logistical arrangements were made by Nassereddine. In addition to the summit, operatives from other countries gathered in Caracas to meet with these terrorist chieftains.

- The Venezuelan airline, Conviasa, conducts regular flights between Caracas and Damascus and Teheran. The Hezbollah networks use these flights and others to ferry operatives, recruits, and cargo in and out of the region.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, due to the “official” support from some governments in Latin America (Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and others), and the unwillingness of others to recognize the threat, we can expect to see the Hezbollah presence in Latin America become more active and deadly in the coming years. The apparent terminal illness of the Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chávez might reduce that country’s risky support for Hezbollah; unfortunately, that terror network has metastasized in the Americas, and our research indicates that the most tempting target for Hezbollah in the region is Brazil, one of the world’s ten largest economies with an estimated population of one million Muslims.

As it stands today, I believe the Hezbollah/Iranian presence in Latin America constitutes a clear threat to the security of the U.S. homeland. They have the motivation, and they have been steadily increasing their capacity to act. In addition to operational terrorist activity, Hezbollah also is immersed in criminal activity throughout the region – from trafficking in weapons, drugs, and persons — all of which threaten our security.

The more broad implication for U.S. homeland security is that Hezbollah – via Iran and Venezuela – has engaged the United States in an offensive strategy of asymmetric warfare on our doorstep. It is aiming to win the mental battle of attrition and the moral battle of legitimacy – particularly with the youth in Latin America. Unless our government recognizes and responds to their efforts, our ability to protect our interests and our homeland will be gradually and dangerously diminished.

U.S. and other government authorities have identified and sanctioned some of the leaders of these networks. However, recent public statements suggest that U.S. diplomats are unaware of the increasing operations and reach of the Hezbollah network. By contrast, U.S. law enforcement agencies – led by the Drug Enforcement Administration – have made great efforts to assess and confront this threat by building cases against foreign officials and sanctioning commercial entities that provide support to this criminal terror organization. However, this dangerous network requires a whole-of-government strategy, beginning with an inter-agency review to understand and assess the transnational, multi-faceted nature of the problem, to educate friendly governments on what is happening, and to implement effective measures unilaterally and with willing partners to disrupt and dismantle their operations.

If our government and responsible partners in Latin America fail to act, I believe there will be an attack on U.S. personnel, installations or interests in the Americas as soon as Hezbollah operatives believe that they are capable of such an operation without implicating their Iranian sponsors in the crime.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.